NONPROVISIONAL APPLICATION FOR LETTERS PATENT
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The following specification is directed to new and useful improvements in an

APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR BAGGING ICE

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APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR BAGGING ICE

CROSS-REFERENCE AND PRIORITY CLAIM TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

To the full extent permitted by law, the present continuation-in-part application claims priority to and the full benefit of nonprovisional patent application entitled "Apparatus and Method For Bagging Ice", filed on November 5, 2002, and having assigned Serial No. 10/288,146.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates generally to ice machines, and more specifically to an ice-bagging apparatus and method thereof. The present invention is particularly suitable for, although not strictly limited to, automatically bagging ice for the continuous supply thereof, wherein a bag identification mechanism is utilized to ensure the use of only a select type or brand of bag within the ice-bagging apparatus.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Bagged ice may be found in most grocery stores, convenience stores, gas stations and/or superstores. These bags are typically stored in freezers on the premises of such locations. A concern for most vendors of these establishments is the necessity of maintaining an adequate supply of bagged ice for their customers. Unfortunately, most establishments are not equipped with ice-making and bagging facilities or machinery and are thus forced to rely on shipments of bagged ice and consequently accept the potential delay thereof, thus adversely affecting the establishment's customer satisfaction and profit margin.

Although some establishments may be equipped with ice-making machinery, most are typically not equipped with efficient and automated ice-bagging machinery. Instead, such establishments often have on-site employees manually fill individual bags with ice and then load the individual bags into a freezer, thus resulting in a highly inefficient and potentially unsanitary process. Furthermore, bags manually filled with ice are generally not immediately placed within a freezer to maintain solid state of the ice, but are instead allowed to sit for a period of time on the floor or in a basket

or container where bridging/fusing of the ice results as a consequence of the ice melting. As such, a customer purchasing manually filled bags of ice is often burdened with having to break a large clump or block of ice into useable pieces. Bags of ice shipped or trucked to a grocery store are also subject to bridging during transport of the ice bags from the delivery truck to inside the store and then into the store's freezers.

Facilities that possess presently available ice making, bagging and storing machine are still at a disadvantage, as the technology of prior-art machines has generally remained inefficient, thereby adversely affecting profitability. In particular, most prior-art machines require augers to channel and physically transport ice produced by the icemaker to a reservoir for subsequent bagging. As such augers are typically slow in transporting the ice to the reservoir and fail to incorporate drainage mechanisms to assist in the channeling away of melting ice, unwanted bridging/fusing of ice particles results, and as such, utilization and incorporation of such augers is disadvantageous. Furthermore, because such machinery may bag ice based on weight of the collected ice within the reservoir, fused clumps of ice are often deposited into the bags when the required weight of ice, clumped or not, has been met. Consequently, the slow speed and inefficiency of machinery

incorporating such augers directly impacts the number of bags of ice that can be produced and, as such, has a direct and negative impact on sales volume and profit of the establishment utilizing the machinery.

Moreover, prior-art ice making, bagging and storing machines that incorporate hoppers for receipt of ice from the icemaker, typically do not possess an agitator in the hopper to assist in breaking up and/or agitating the ice particles/cubes so as to prevent bridging. As a result, bags of ice yielded from these prior art machines generally contain fused clumps of ice particles/cubes, thereby inconveniencing the purchaser/customer by requiring him/her to break apart the chunks of ice into smaller useable pieces.

An additional concern with prior art ice making, bagging and storing machines, and within the ice-bagging industry in general, is the inability of original equipment manufactures to uphold product warranties due to actions conducted on behalf of purchasers of the ice machines. Specifically, many ice machines may require a specific type or brand of bag to effectively and continuously function properly, wherein such bags are often made available for purchase through the original equipment manufacturer (OEM). However, instead of purchasing the proper

bags from the OEM, many machine purchasers typically purchase bags from a second source, perhaps due to past dealings and/or established business relationships therewith. Unfortunately, many such second-source bags may not be the proper type or size of bag, and/or may not be manufactured from the requisite material needed to withstand the rigors and bagging process of the machine. As such, use of such bags often results in machine malfunction, improper or defective product (ice) bagging, and thus, the subsequent voiding of OEM warranties. Additionally, because the livelihood and success of many companies is often dependent upon name recognition and the association of same with high-quality goods and/or services, many consumers may attribute an improperly or defectively bagged ice product to the OEM name (trademark) printed or otherwise displayed on the machine itself, and not to the second-source manufacture name printed on the bag, thus potentially resulting in tarnishment of the OEM's name or trademark. As such, a decline in sales of bagged ice may have a significant financial and future machine sales impact on the OEM, especially in scenarios where the ice machine has been leased and the lessee chooses not to renew the lease based upon the decline in sales.

Therefore, it is readily apparent that there is a need for an ice-bagging apparatus that provides an establishment with the

ability to automatically and continuously produce, bag and store bags of ice without the occurrence of bridging between the ice particles/cubes, and without the need for manual labor and/or continuous monitoring of the machinery. There is a further need for an ice-bagging apparatus that incorporates a bag identification mechanism to ensure the use of only a select type or brand of bag within the ice-bagging apparatus.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Briefly described, in a preferred embodiment, the present invention overcomes the above-mentioned disadvantages and meets the recognized need for such a device by providing an ice-bagging apparatus and method that provides an establishment with the ability to automatically and expeditiously produce, bag and store bags of ice, thus maintaining a desired supply of bagged ice by eliminating conventional methods of manual ice bagging and reducing the likelihood of unwanted bridging of the ice particles/cubes. The present invention further incorporates a bag identification mechanism to ensure the use of only a select type or brand of bag within the ice-bagging apparatus.

According to its major aspects and broadly stated, the present invention in its preferred form is an ice-bagging

apparatus having an icemaker, a hopper for receiving ice from the icemaker, a slider box for receiving ice from the hopper and for channeling the ice into a bag, a bagging mechanism for bagging the ice, a bag identification mechanism, a freezer for storing the bagged ice and a control panel for managing and monitoring said system.

More specifically, the present invention is an ice bagging apparatus having an icemaker, a hopper for receiving ice from the icemaker, a slider box positioned under the hopper for receiving ice therefrom and for channeling the ice into a bag, wherein the bag is fed through the apparatus via a bag supply mechanism. Once filled with a desired amount of ice, the slider box slides or travels along a slider tray and is preferably computer-programmed or electronically controlled to position itself over the bag, wherein ice is subsequently deposited therein. Prior to filling, the mouth of the bag is preferably blown open via a blower/fan and physically held open via a pivoting hatch positioned just over the bag. The filled bag is then heat sealed via heat sealers and then dropped into a rotator, wherein motors rotate the rotator, allowing the bag to drop into a freezer or storage unit. The entire process is preferably fully automated and/or computer controlled, such that the speed of the machine can be altered according to the desired

production rate of bagged ice. The apparatus further possesses laser eyes positioned at specified points on the apparatus for reading the process of the apparatus at various stages, so as to ensure proper functioning thereof.

Additionally, to ensure use of only a select type or brand of bag, a bag identification process is preferably initiated prior to filling each bag with ice. Specifically, a bag identification mechanism utilizing strategically positioned laser eyes preferably systematically detects, reads and measures the length of label sections printed on the bag, as well as the distance between each label section. The tabulated or measured values (i.e., relative lengths and distances between the label sections) are compared against a pre-programmed or set value of lengths/measurements defined by the onboard computer of the control panel. Should the apparatus or computer encounter a discrepancy between the measured values and defined values, the computer may selectively deactivate systems operations of the apparatus entirely, permit systems operations and forward a status report of the discrepancies to the original equipment manufacturer for management or resolution, and/or deactivate systems operations after a series or set number of separately detected discrepancies, wherein the latter option accounts for

possible machine-related error, identification error, inherent defects in the bag, or the like (i.e., allows room for error).

Should the apparatus encounter a general system malfunction, the apparatus will attempt to correct the malfunction via computer pre-programmed responses implemented within the control panel. If the apparatus is unable to correct the malfunction, the control panel sends messages or signals via modem or other communication devices to the manufacturer of the apparatus for repair and/or to store management depending upon the complexity of the problem. Additionally, data can be collected and analyzed regarding the volume of sales based on the number of bags utilized, the number of cycles or the volume of ice produced.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to continuously and automatically produce bags of ice, thus constantly maintaining a desired supply of bags of ice.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to send and receive computer signals for regular maintenance and/or reporting.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to drain water so as to reduce the likelihood of bridging or fusing of ice particles during the ice making and bagging processes.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to function without the incorporation of augers as utilized in prior-art machines, thus reducing the likelihood of bridging of the ice.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to permit and police the selection of a particular type and/or brand of bag.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its reduced size as compared to prior-art machines, thus reducing the necessary footprint and consequently the costs of floor space.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to physically or mechanically hold open a bag during the process of filling the bag with ice.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to agitate the ice held within the hopper, thus reducing the likelihood of bridging of the ice.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to function without the use of an auger as utilized in prior art machines, thus enabling increased production rates.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to reduce the vendor's overall cost of bagged ice.

A feature and advantage of the present invention is its ability to correct and/or attempt to correct problems associated with its components and/or machine parts, wherein problems that require further investigation or repair are reported via a modem and/or global networking system to a repair or servicing company, or the like.

These and other features and advantages of the present invention will become more apparent to one skilled in the art from the following description and claims when read in light of the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention will be better understood by reading the Detailed Description of the Preferred and Alternate Embodiments with reference to the accompanying drawing figures, in which like reference numerals denote similar structure and refer to like elements throughout, and in which:

FIG. 1 is a front perspective view of an ice-bagging apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 2 is a front perspective view of an ice-bagging apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 3 is a front perspective view of an ice-bagging apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 4 is a front perspective view of an ice-bagging apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 5 is a perspective view of the slider box of an ice-bagging apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 6 is a perspective view of the hatch and heat seal pad of an ice-bagging apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 7 is a side view of the bagging assembly of an ice-bagging apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 8 is a side view of the bagging assembly and the storage of an ice-bagging apparatus according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 9 is a front view of a bag according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention, showing an aspect of the preferred bag identification process.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED AND SELECTED ALTERNATE EMBODIMENTS

In describing the preferred and selected alternate embodiments of the present invention, as illustrated in **FIGS. 1-9**, specific terminology is employed for the sake of clarity. The invention, however, is not intended to be limited to the specific terminology so selected, and it is to be understood that each specific element includes all technical equivalents that operate in a similar manner to accomplish similar functions.

Referring now to **FIG. 1**, the present invention in a preferred embodiment is an apparatus **10**, wherein apparatus **10** is an ice-bagging apparatus having, in general, icemaker assembly **20**, bagging assembly **40**, storage **140** and control panel **150**. Preferably, icemaker assembly **20** is positioned on and above bagging assembly **40**, and bagging assembly **40** is preferably positioned on and above storage **140**. Bagging assembly **40** further preferably possesses control panel **150** secured thereto, wherein control panel **150** is preferably in computer or electronic communication with apparatus **10** in general, as more fully described below. One skilled in the art would readily recognize that control panel **150** could be positioned in any

location on or near apparatus **10**, wherein user accessibility and functional communication between necessary components is facilitated. Moreover, while the generally "stacked" arrangement is preferred, the relative positions of icemaker assembly **20**, bagging assembly **40** and storage **140** could be alternatively configured, wherein alternate and/or additional means of ice transport therebetween could be incorporated, or one unit housing icemaker assembly **20**, bagging assembly **40** and storage **140** could be utilized, wherein individual housings and apertures therebetween could be modified and/or eliminated.

Icemaker assembly **20** is preferably a conventional icemaker as known within the art, possessing icemaker **22** enclosed within housing **24**, wherein bottom wall **26** of housing **24** preferably possesses aperture **28**, and wherein aperture **28** is preferably aligned with hopper **42** of bagging assembly **40** so as to permit ice produced by icemaker **22** to enter through aperture **28** for receipt by hopper **42**, as more fully described below. To ensure the highest quality of ice produced via icemaker **22**, sediment filter **25** and UV filter **27** are preferably disposed within icemaker assembly **20** and/or in-line with the water source to preferably filter the water prior to production of ice therefrom.

Referring now to **FIGS. 2-4**, bagging assembly **40** is preferably enclosed within housing **41**, wherein upper wall **41a** of housing **41** possesses an aperture **42a** positioned over and aligned with mouth **44** of hopper **42**, and wherein hopper **42** is preferably inverted-pyramidal-shaped to facilitate the funneling therein of ice cubes/particles produced by icemaker **22**. Aperture **42a** is further preferably aligned with aperture **28** of icemaker assembly **20**, wherein ice produced by icemaker **22** preferably falls through aperture **28** of icemaker assembly **20**, through aperture **42a** of housing **41** of bagging assembly **40**, and then into mouth **44** of hopper **42**. Once hopper **42** is filled with a desired amount of ice as dictated by control panel **150**, ice collected within hopper **42** is preferably channeled into slider box **60** through aperture **43** of hopper **42**, wherein slider box **60** is positioned directly beneath hopper **42**, as more fully described below.

Hopper **42** preferably possesses agitator **46**, wherein agitator **46** preferably possesses a generally elongated-rectangular-shaped arm **48** having first end **48a** and second end **48b**, wherein arm **48** is preferably slidably engaged with slot **42c** formed through wall **42b** of hopper **42**.

Preferably formed through arm **48** is slot **50**, preferably having first end **50a** and second end **50b**, wherein first end **50a**

is preferably positioned proximal first end **48a** of arm **48**, and wherein second end **50b** is preferably positioned proximal second end **48b** of arm **48**. Pin **52** preferably extends through throughhole **53a** of prong-shaped support bracket **53**, wherein support bracket **53** is preferably formed on edge **69** of slider box **60**, and wherein pin **52** thereafter preferably extends through slot **50** and is slidably engaged therewith, as best depicted in **FIG. 2**.

Preferably formed at second end **48b** of arm **48** of agitator **46**, and angled outwardly therefrom, are prongs **54** and **56**, wherein prongs **54** and **56** preferably assist in the agitation of ice within hopper **42** upon the movement of arm **48** through slot **42c** of hopper **42**. Specifically, upon movement of slider box **60** over slider tray **80** (for purposes more fully described below), pin **52** of arm **48** of agitator **46** preferably leaves first end **50a** of slot **50** of arm **48** and slides through the length of slot **50** until pin **52** contacts second end **50b** of slot **50**, whereupon pin **52** pushes arm **48** through slot **42c** of hopper **42**, thus agitating ice collected therein via prongs **54** and **56** of arm **48**, thereby reducing/eliminating the occurrence of bridging between the ice. While arm **48** and prongs **54** and **56** are preferably utilized to agitate ice collected in hopper **42**, one skilled in the art, with the benefit of the present disclosure, would readily recognize

that other shapes, agitation means and/or mechanisms could be utilized to perform substantially the same function without departing from the intended scope of the present invention.

Referring now more specifically to **FIG. 3-4**, control panel **150** is preferably hingably connected to housing **41** of bagging assembly **40** via hinges **151**, wherein removal of spring-loaded pin **152** of control panel **150** from lock-hole **152** formed on housing **41** of bagging assembly **40** preferably exposes hopper **42**, thus permitting the removal of hopper **42** from housing **41** via slidably removing hopper **42** from support rails **47** and **49** positioned on and secured to upper wall **41a** of housing **41**. To facilitate removal of hopper **42** from housing **41**, pin **52** of arm **48** of agitator **46** is preferably removed from throughhole **53a** of support bracket **53** of slider box **60**, thus permitting arm **48** to unlatch therefrom. Once removed from housing **41**, hopper **42** can then be sanitized and/or cleaned as desired, thus further maintaining the sterility of ice deposited therein.

Referring now to **FIG. 5**, slider box **60** preferably possesses a generally trapezoidal-shape and preferably has an aperture **62** formed through front area **60a** of slider box **60**, wherein slider tray **80** positioned under slider box **60** preferably serves as a bottom or closure means for aperture **62**, thus permitting slider

box **60** to maintain ice received from hopper **42** therein. To increase the overall volumetric capacity of aperture **62** of slider box **60**, front wall **65** of slider box **60** is preferably slidably adjustable via slot-and-bolt mechanisms **65a** and **65b** formed on side walls **60b** and **60c**, respectively, of slider box **60** and in communication with front wall **65**, wherein front wall **65** is preferably adjustable to enable aperture **62** to receive **5** lbs, **10** lbs and/or **20** lbs of ice therein for the subsequent generation of **5** lbs, **10** lbs and/or **20** lbs bags of ice, respectively. Furthermore, front wall **65** preferably possesses upwardly angled lip **65c** formed thereon, wherein angled lip **65c** preferably abuts front edge **43c** of aperture **43** of hopper **42** when slider box **60** is in a resting position, thus shunting the flow of any vestigial ice particles from aperture **43** of hopper **42** **(see FIGS. 7-8)**. Although aperture **62** of slider box **60** is capable of receiving **5** lbs, **10** lbs and/or **20** lbs of ice, it is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that aperture **62** and/or front wall **65** could be modified to receive any desired quantity of ice. Slider box **60** is preferably formed from a metal material, although other suitable materials may be utilized, such as, for exemplary purposes only, plastic.

Formed preferably along side walls **60b** and **60c** of slider box **60**, proximal to angled region **60d** of bottom wall **61** of

slider box **60**, are channels **64** and **66**, respectively, wherein channels **64** and **66** preferably function to divert water and/or slurry from the ice held within aperture **62** of slider box **60** and on slider tray **80**, as more fully described below. Additionally, formed preferably on sides **60b** and **60c** of slider box **60** are rail engagers **68** and **70**, respectively, that preferably slidably engage rails **72** and **74** positioned along side walls **80a** and **80b**, respectively, of slider tray **80**, and ending in secured contact with front walls **80c** and **80d**, respectively of slider tray **80**. Rail engagers **68** and **70** of slider box **60** and respective rails **72** and **74** of slider tray **80** preferably permit slider box **60** to travel along slider tray **80** via assistance from motor **89** (not shown) positioned under slider tray **80**, thus permitting slider box **60** to deposit ice into bag **102**, as more fully described below. Furthermore, to ensure that slider box **60** slides the appropriate distance over, slider tray **80**, slider box **60** preferably possesses trip bar **60e** formed on side wall **60b** of slider box **60**, wherein trip bar **60e** preferably contacts and trips switch **60f** positioned proximal slider tray **80** and in computer-communication with control panel **150 (see FIG. 5)**, and wherein the tripping of switch **60f** by trip bar **60e** preferably halts further movement of slider box **60** over slider tray **80**.

Slider tray **80** is preferably substantially rectangular-shaped and is preferably formed from a metal material, although other suitable materials may be utilized, such as, for exemplary purposes only, plastic. Preferably, aperture **82** is formed through bottom wall **84** of slider tray **80**, wherein computer-activated or automated movement of slider box **60** along rails **72** and **74** preferably results in aperture **62** of slider box **60** being aligned with and positioned over aperture **82** of slider tray **80**, such that ice collected and retained within slider box **60** is thereafter deposited through aperture **62** of slider box **60** and then through aperture **82** of slider tray **80** for subsequent receipt by bag **102**, as more fully described below. Furthermore, when slider box **60** slides over slider tray **80**, flat upper surface **67** of slider box **60**, proximal aperture **62** of front area **60a**, preferably becomes positioned under aperture **43** of hopper **42**, thus shunting and/or stopping any further ice from exiting aperture **43** of hopper **42**.

Preferably, slider tray **80** is positioned on mount **96**, wherein mount **96** is preferably ramp-like so that slider tray **80** and supported slider box **60** are preferably upwardly slanted and/or angled relative to storage **140**. Such preferred slanting/angling of slider tray **80** and supported slider box **60** gravitationally encourages liquid and/or slurry formed within

and on slider box **60** to travel downwardly and away from the ice held within aperture **62** of slider box **60** and on slider tray **80**, wherein such water and/or melting ice is preferably diverted through and down channels **64** and **66** of slider box **60** and into slider tray **80**, whereupon water may be drained therefrom via drainage spout **63** formed on slider tray **80** via assistance from attached hose **63A**. This preferred configuration reduces the likelihood of bridging or fusing of the ice cubes held within aperture **62** due to excess water and/or melting ice.

Referring now to **FIGS. 6-8**, secured preferably to sides **96a** and **96b** of mount **96** are ends **95a** and **97a**, respectively, of rails **95** and **97**, respectively, wherein opposing ends **95b** and **97b**, respectively, are preferably in communication with heat seal pad **98**, and wherein heat seal pad **98** is preferably any suitable heat seal pad as known within the art. Formed preferably on front face **96c** of mount **96** is heat seal strip **99**, wherein computer activated sliding of heat seal pad **98** along rails **95** and **97** preferably enables contact of heat seal pad **98** with heat seal strip **99**, thus heat sealing the top portion of an ice-filled bag **102** positioned therebetween, as more fully described below. Furthermore, to prevent a heat-sealed bag of ice **102** from sticking to heat seal strip **99**, spring-loaded kick-bar **99c** positioned preferably over and around heat seal strip **99**

preferably springfully kicks forward, thus pushing the heat-sealed bag of ice **102** off heat sealer **99**, wherein kick-bar **99c** is preferably initially pushed inward upon initial heat sealing of bag **102**. Heat seal pad **98** is preferably positioned beneath bottom wall **84** of slider tray **80** so as to prevent heat seal pad **98** from interfering with the passage of ice from aperture **82** of slider tray **80** into bag **102** positioned thereunder.

Bag roll **100**, preferably positioned behind angled region **60d** of slider box **60**, preferably supplies bags **102** for the filling of ice therein, wherein bags **102** are preferably joined and separable via perforations **105** formed between each bag **102**. Preferably, only one side of bag **102** is attached to a preceding bag **102**, wherein the unattached or opposing side of bag **102** is preferably freely openable so as to expose mouth **103** of bag **102** for the placement of ice therein and therethrough. As best illustrated in **FIG. 4**, bag roll **100** is preferably supported in housing **41** of bagging assembly **40** via spool-mechanism **100a**. Preferably, upon exhaustion of bags **102** from bag roll **100**, spool-mechanism **100a** preferably permits a new bag roll **100** to be placed on spool pin **100b** via removal of spool plate **100c** from spool pin **100b**.

Specifically, bags **102** are preferably conveyed over roller assembly **104**, wherein roller assembly **104** is preferably positioned substantially beneath slider tray **80**. Bags **102** traveling over roller assembly **104** are preferably transported through bagging assembly **40** and an individual bag **102** is preferably halted under aperture **82** of slider tray **80**, and preferably over rotator **130** for subsequent receipt of a filled bag of ice **102** therein, as more fully described below. Upon bringing a bag **102** to a halt under aperture **82**, blower **106** preferably blows open bag **102** via tube **106a** and blower vent **106b**, thus exposing mouth **103** for the placement of ice therethrough and therein, wherein blower **106** is preferably a conventional fan blower as known within the art, and wherein blower vent **106b** is preferably positioned within chute **111** and over bag **102**, as more fully described below. Following the blowing open of bag **102**, control panel **150** preferably computer activates slider box **60** to slide up slider tray **80** via rails **72** and **74**, resulting in aperture **62** of slider box **60** aligning with and positioning over aperture **82** of slider tray **80**, such that ice collected and retained within slider box **60** is thereafter deposited through aperture **62** of slider box **60**, through aperture **82** of slider tray **80**, through chute **111** aligned therewith, and then through mouth **103** of bag **102** for the collection of the ice therein.

Referring now to **FIG. 9**, and with continued reference to **FIGS. 1-4**, to enable selection of a specific make, brand, size and/or type of bag **102**, a bag identification process is preferably initiated prior to filling each bag **102** with ice; although, such bag identification processes may be conducted at any selected or various stages of the bagging process described herein. Specifically, as each bag **102** advances through bagging assembly **40**, strategically positioned laser eyes **107** preferably systematically detect, read and measure the length of indicia or label sections **102b** and **102c** printed on top surface **102a** of bag **102**, as well as the length or distance **102d** between each label section **102b** and **102c**, wherein label section **102b** is preferably measured first, then distance **102d**, followed by label section **102c**. The tabulated or measured values (i.e., relative lengths and distances between label sections **102b** and **102c**, and distance **102d**) are compared against a pre-programmed or set value of lengths/measurements defined by the onboard computer of control panel **150**, preferably for purposes of identifying and verifying the authenticity of bag **102** for use of same in apparatus **10**. Should the computer of control panel **150** encounter a discrepancy between the measured values and defined values, the computer of control panel **150** may selectively deactivate systems operations of apparatus **10** entirely, permit systems operations and forward a status report of the discrepancies to the original equipment

manufacturer for management or resolution, and/or deactivate systems operations after a series or set number of separately detected discrepancies, wherein the latter option accounts for possible machine-related error, bag-feed error, identification error, inherent defects in bags **102**, inherent defects in the printing of label sections **102b** and **102c**, or the like (i.e., allows room for error). Although it is preferred that laser eyes **107** read and measure label section **102b** first, then distance **102d**, followed by label section **102c**, it should be recognized that any order of reading or measuring of same could be utilized, as well as any configuration, arrangement and/or number of label sections and/or measured distances therebetween. It is further contemplated that the bottom surface of bag **102** could also possess label sections for bag identification purposes. It is still further contemplated that any suitable sensing and/or bag identification mechanism could be utilized, such as, for exemplary purposes only, photoelectric eyes, laser technology and/or barcode technology, for reading any suitable bag identification indicia, such as, for exemplary purposes only, colors, barcodes, shapes, reference characters, letters, numbers, selected distances, voids, spaces, or the like.

Laser eyes **107** also preferably function to detect operational and/or mechanical maintenance requirements

associated with bag **102** and/or bag roll **100**, wherein such maintenance may include detecting when bag roll **100** is on its last bag **102**, and/or detecting strands of adhesive tape typically utilized to connect one bag roll **100** to another bag roll **100**. As best illustrated in **FIGS. 1-4**, laser eyes **107** preferably flank roller assembly **104**. Although laser eyes **107** are preferred, any comparable assessment and/or data collection means could be utilized, such as, for exemplary purposes only, infrared or ultraviolet or other scanning means.

Referring back to **FIG. 5**, preferably, lever **108** is positioned on and in pivotal communication with edge **80e** of sidewall **80b** of slider tray **80**, and just forward of front wall **65** of slider box **60**. Attached to lever **108** is end **110a** of cable **110**, wherein pivotation of lever **108** preferably causes the subsequent tensioning of attached cable **110**. End **110b** of cable **110** is preferably attached to shovelhead-shaped hatch **112**, wherein hatch **112** is preferably positioned proximate to aperture **82** of slider tray **80**, and proximate to mouth **103** of bag **102**, and wherein hatch **112** preferably functions as a gate over bag **102**, permitting ice to be loaded therein only when hatch **112** is opened. Preferably, tensioning of cable **110** causes hatch **112** to flip downward relative to slider tray **80** and manually hold open bag **102**, thus widening mouth **103** of bag **102** and facilitating the

filling of ice therethrough and therein, wherein hatch **112** further functions as a slide, channeling ice passing thereagainst through mouth **103** and into bag **102**. Halting and filling of bag **102** is further preferably accurately guided and controlled via laser eyes **101** that preferably flank heat seal pad **98**, as best illustrated in **FIG. 6**. Although laser eyes **101** are preferred for guidance and control, one skilled in the art would readily recognize that other means for sensory guidance and control could be utilized, such as, for exemplary purposes only, infrared and/or ultraviolet mechanisms.

Upon completion of filling bag **102** with ice, slider box **60** preferably returns to its resting position, thus returning lever **108** to its resting position and causing hatch **112** to close, wherein hatch **112** is preferably springfully urged shut via attached spring **116**. Thereafter, control panel **150** preferably computer activates the movement of heat seal pad **98** along rails **95** and **97**, wherein heat seal pad **98** preferably contacts heat seal strip **99** of mount **96**, thus heat sealing the top portion of an ice-filled bag **102** positioned therebetween. Preferably during heat sealing of bag **102**, tines **114** formed on edge **98a** of heat seal pad **98** preferably assist in the separation of a filled bag of ice **102** from an unfilled bag **102** via mechanically

perforating bags **102** from one another along perforations **105** of bags **102**, as best illustrated in **FIG. 6**.

Upon separation of ice-filled bag **102** from the preceding unfilled bag **102**, ice-filled bag **102** preferably drops into rotator **130**, wherein rotator **130** is preferably positioned to receive ice-filled bag **102**. Rotator **130** is preferably a basket-like container **132** having rotating motors **134** and **136** on opposing sides **132a** and **132b**, respectively, of container **132**. Rotating motors **134** and **136** preferably function to rotate container **132** preferably **360** degrees, thus allowing ice-filled bag **102** to drop into storage **140** via aperture **142** formed in storage **140** and into container **132**, wherein container **132** preferably rotatably returns to its resting position to receive another ice-filled bag **102** for subsequent deposit into storage **140**. Although **360** degrees is preferred, any measure of rotational movement less than **360** degrees could be utilized, wherein the deposit of ice-filled bags into storage **140** could continue to be enabled. To ensure proper rotation of rotator **130**, laser eyes **138** preferably flank rotator **130** and signal control panel **150** to remedy an improperly/incompletely rotated rotator **130**.

Storage **140** is preferably any conventionally available freezer utilized to maintain freezing temperatures of bagged ice stored therein, wherein storage **140** preferably possesses an aperture **142** formed preferably on top surface **140a** of storage **140** and preferably positioned/aligned above rotator **130** for receipt of bagged ice **102** therefrom. It is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that storage **140** could possesses an automated swiveling shifter positioned proximal aperture **142**, wherein the shifter would swing from side to side as bagged ice **102** is deposited into storage **140**, thus enabling bagged ice **102** to be equally distributed throughout storage **140**.

Control panel **150** is preferably affixed to bagging assembly **40** and preferably is in electronic or computer-control therewith. Specifically, control panel **150** preferably electronically or computer-activates and controls all operations of icemaker assembly **20**, bagging assembly **40**, storage **140**, and apparatus **10** in general. Moreover, upon encountering a problem/malfunction in the operations of apparatus **10**, control panel **150** preferably troubleshoots and directs pre-programmed problem solving events to correct the problem, whereupon the inability of control panel **150** to correct the problem preferably results in control panel **150** sending a message and/or signal to the original equipment manufacturer or other appropriately

authorized maintenance personnel for repair, and/or to store management depending upon the complexity of the problem. Control panel **150** preferably sends the signals via computer networking, modems and/or global networking systems, and/or via any other known messaging/signaling technologies. Additionally, control panel **150** preferably signals store management regarding simple maintenance issues including, but not limited to, bag roll **100** replacement and/or replacement of sediment filters **25** and UV filters **27**, wherein such signaling may be via audible beeps/buzzers, warning lights and/or other sensory mechanisms and/or known messaging/signaling technologies.

It is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that bagging assembly **40** of apparatus **10** could possess a plurality of bag rolls **100**, wherein apparatus **10** could be further modified/altered to facilitate the simultaneous bagging of a plurality of bags of ice **102**.

It is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that bagging assembly **40** could include a substantially continuous roll of bags having side seams only, wherein user-programmable selection of bag size could be enabled, wherein heat sealing of two ends of the bag could be enabled, and wherein an automated cutting mechanism could be included to cut the newly sealed bag.

Moreover, bagging assembly **40** could utilize two rolls of sealable plastic, wherein plastic from each said roll could form one side of the ice bag, wherein the sides and the bottom could be heat sealed to form the bag, and wherein the bag could be subsequently cut from the rolls of plastic.

It is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that bagging assembly **40** could utilize continuous feed bags with zipper-type closure means incorporated thereon, wherein sealing of filled bags could be accomplished without the application of heat.

It is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that icemaker assembly **20**, bagging assembly **40** and storage **140** of apparatus **10** could be situated adjacent one another and in adjacent communication with one another.

It is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that apparatus **10** could be manufactured without storage **140**, wherein storage **140** could be replaced with a receptacle, such that a customer could utilize a keypad or the like to enter the numerical amount of bagged ice desired, and thereafter receive freshly bagged ice deposited into the receptacle by apparatus **10**.

It is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that apparatus **10** could be equipped with a volumetric drum to further assist in the measurement and dispensing of a specified quantity of ice.

It is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that apparatus **10** could be equipped with multiple icemaker assemblies **20**, multiple hoppers **40**, multiple slider boxes **60** and multiple slider trays for the simultaneous bagging of multiple bags **102** of ice thereby.

It is contemplated in an alternate embodiment that apparatus **10** could be modified and/or altered to deposit ice-filled bags **102** through more than one aperture in storage **140**, thus permitting ice-filled bags **102** to be evenly distributed within storage **140**.

Having thus described exemplary embodiments of the present invention, it should be noted by those skilled in the art that the within disclosures are exemplary only, and that various other alternatives, adaptations, and modifications may be made within the scope of the present invention. Accordingly, the present invention is not limited to the specific embodiments

illustrated herein, but is limited only by the following claims.